Library Book Bikes: Problems and Possibilities

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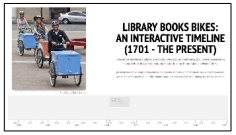
Purpose

As Katrin A. Abel writes in her unpublished manuscript "Public Library Book Bikes: History and How-To" (2015), book bikes are "the latest [in a lineage of] earth-friendly, human-powered mobile library outposts" that also includes, among others, Mary Lemist Titcomb's "Book Wagon" and the Works Progress Administration's Pack Horse Library Project. And yet, comparatively little attention has been paid to them in terms of professional and scholarly writing. This research seeks to help stimulate more work on book bikes by creating new resources and sharing reflections from recent interviews and a comprehensive literature review.

Accompanying Research Outputs



Interactive Timeline

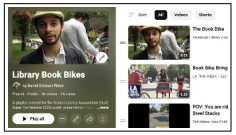
https://tinyurl.com/2n6vycje

An interactive timeline of key points in the history of library book bikes.

BiblioCommons List

https://tinyurl.com/ff4z9esv

A curated list of readings about book bikes and mobile libraries.



YouTube Playlist

https://tinyurl.com/mr495jjx

A curated playlist of YouTube content featuring library book bikes.

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You can also scan this QR code for a downloadable PDF of this poster presentation and a list of the links above. Or find it all on my profile page at the Internet Archive:

https://archive.org/details/@danielclarksonfisher

You can also email me at danielclarksonfisher@duck.com.

INSIGHTS FROM LIBRARY BOOK BIKE INNOVATORS: Karen Greene (PCPL) & Ednita Seavers (LAPL)

[L-R: Karen Greene of Pima County Public Library (Tucson, AZ) and Ednita Seavers of Los Angeles Public Library. Photos used with permission.]

Use Library Book Bikes to Help Serve the Underserved

Karen says, "We have a program here called Books on Wheels where volunteers select books and then Bike Ambassadors deliver them by bike to homebound customers. We decided to add a book bike location where we have a number of deliveries going – a low income senior housing project. So, now we bring checked-out books to those customers and book bike books for other folks living in the facility. I would love to see more of that happening."

Consider Electric Motors

Despite their analog bona fides, both Karen and Ednita note that adding electric motors to library book bikes would, in Karen's words, "really extend the range of where staff can take them."

Think Carefully about Sustainability

"I changed positions within our department, so I don't do outreach like I once did," Ednita says. "The number of book bikes in our system continues to grow, which is promising. Still, the high level of activity my book bike had is a thing of yesteryear unless someone who is enthusiastic and passionate about keeping it out on the road comes along. I wish being a book bike librarian was a position and a crew of enthusiastic folks could dedicate their efforts full-time to this type of outreach."

Remember to Have Fun

Karen also emphasizes the importance of doing more fun things with the book bike, including races and food events. She adds, "We've talked about tag teaming the book bike and riding in our El Tour de Tucson event, but it just hasn't happened yet."

A Brief Typology of Library Book Bikes

Cargo Bikes (cost: ~$5,500 CAD)

Specially designed tricycles made for transporting and displaying books, like this one from Oakville Public Library (Oakville, ON).

Book Bike Trailers (cost: ~$2,500 CAD)

Wheeled cargo carriers / display units made to be pulled behind regular bicycles, like this one from Boston Public Library.

Kiosk Bikes (cost: ~$5,500 CAD)

Cargo bikes with fixed display elements, like this one from Billings Public Library (Billings, MT).

[All photos used with permission.]

Some Questions / Gaps / Opportunities for Future Work

- Given the cost, storage, and other issues that come with custom-builds, might some libraries want to try bespoke DIY book bikes?

- In Two Wheels Good *(Crown, 2022), Jody Rosen observes that cargo bikes are used by "a massive cycling workforce [in] the Global South" and "bourgeois bohemians" in North America and Western Europe. Have librarians in the Global North fully reckoned with book bikes as "status symbols" (pp. 226-7)?*

- I found very little about collection development for library book bikes. More professional writing in this area might be useful.

- Bike-related projects are big in the maker movement. Is there collaboration potential for library book bikes and makerspaces?

Acknowledgments

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